

emphasizing the innovative ways in which hospitals reinvented themselves during the English reformations.

The Medieval Hospital is a very welcome study of the textual communities formed around hospitals, which—in keeping with the spirit of Notre Dame’s ReFormations series—crosses the border of medieval and early modern studies. Rice’s thesis that hospitals formed literary communities to encourage lay devotion is insightful and proven with stimulating examples. The work will not only find an audience among scholars of medieval hospitals, but also book historians and those with an interest in devotional practices. It is impressive how much Rice is able to reconstruct from a limited source base. Indeed, this monograph is a good advertisement for the virtues of book history and the ways in which analysis of codices can fill in gaps left by fragmented archives.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640723003372

***The Mystical Presence of Christ: The Exceptional and the Ordinary in Late Medieval Religion.* By Richard Kieckhefer. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. xvii + 362 pp. \$54.95, hardcover**

Publication of the latest book by one of our most eminent late medieval historians is a welcome event for all scholars of religion. Following a long career toiling in the field, Richard Kieckhefer probably knows better than anyone else the vast literature on both mysticism and popular piety during this period. Yet somehow, he tells us, these two topics have almost always been treated separately. What this book seeks to do, as advertised in the subtitle, is to describe and analyze the conjunction of the two, particularly among a number of Dominican nuns, some of them mystics or even saints. The result, drawing on Kieckhefer’s close readings of so-called “sister books” (*Schwesterbücher*) and spiritual “autobiographies,” is a thoughtful and innovative insight into how common devotion shaped various “Christophanies” (visions of Christ), and vice versa, namely the social consequences of such exceptional experiences.

Direct sensual experiences of Christ’s presence, of course, go back to the very beginning, most notably Saul’s encounter on the road to Damascus. Kieckhefer’s focus, however, is not on the *longue durée* of this spiritual phenomenon, but rather why and how such exceptional visions became so influential in the lives of religious women (chiefly in Germany) during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. As countless Christian theologians (and many contemporary historians) can attest, writing about mysticism is extraordinarily difficult. Kieckhefer’s solution is to scrutinize and convey these visionaries’ experiences as much as possible in their own (inadequate) words. The book is filled with a panoply of examples (including a few better known figures, such as Margery Kempe and Catherine of Siena) and arranged into sequential themes: the humanity of Christ (despite most frequently referring to him as “God”) and the subjectivity of the visionaries (but favoring a historical perspective rather than a psychological one), followed by a series of chapters analyzing the devotional contexts of such

experiences, as well as the latter's influence on other religious women. The book closes with a stand-alone discussion of Dorothea of Montau (1347–1394)—not because she is a typical example (there was no such thing) but because her documentation is particularly thick and allows Kieckhefer to explore in depth many of the themes already discussed. By this point, we are convinced that this mingling of the ordinary and the exceptional was the norm among religious women (and a few men) and subsequently astonished that such a (now obvious) relationship had been so thoroughly ignored until now.

Such a cursory overview does not do justice to the meticulous analysis at work. Christ's presence, we learn, could be experienced in a variety of ways: during silent prayer and meditation but also in the midst of liturgical celebrations, intuitively (that is, inwardly) but also through Christ's actual appearances (apparently outwardly), as the product of intentional suffering (hair shirts, fasts, overwork) but also as part of quite ordinary (and nonpenitential) devotional routines. These "personal relationships with Jesus" at first glance appear similar to the beliefs of modern Evangelicals, but Kieckhefer is careful to avoid any anachronistic comparison, noting that in the late medieval context Jesus not only consoled and counseled but also frequently criticized or admonished. He might be eroticized as a bridegroom but at other times appear angry and judgmental—not always a "feel good Jesus" in other words.

It is a tribute to Kieckhefer's empathy and imagination that the reader is able to come so close to these long-gone individuals. He takes no position on the "reality" of their visions and moves seamlessly between theology and practice, always calling our attention to the historical (and sometimes unique) context of these women and their experiences. Predictably, their descriptions of Christ reflected the inculturation of contemporary paintings and sculptures as well as daily gospel readings. What was perhaps most revelatory to me was the communal reception of visionary accounts, which were sometimes held back for fear of ridicule or worse. Contrary to Margery of Kempe's frequent experience of mockery, convent communities generally responded positively to "special gifts," and even made use of them in building group solidarity, particularly during challenging times. Thus a convent might be the source of such visions in its daily devotions, as well as the beneficiary of them.

The surest sign of the book's success is that it left me wanting for more,—not necessarily more details (which are occasionally overwhelming), but further exploration of some findings. Kieckhefer, for instance, devotes a chapter to the significance of gender in such experiences (wisely avoiding over-eroticized characterizations), but the brief comparison to men (including Walter Hilton and Meister Eckhart) leaves many unanswered questions. Why did the accounts of male mystics focus more on externals while female mystics almost exclusively on their inner lives? How did these mainly female Christophanies compare to the Marian devotions of mostly men? Why was cataphatic mysticism seemingly more common among women than men? This is rich material for scholars of gender from any period. The same is true for late medieval scholars of religion, including literary experts. Presumably this is Kieckhefer's target audience, as the book would be a stretch for most undergraduates and lay readers. Otherwise I recommend it wholeheartedly as a work full of fascinating insights.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640723003517